

# **‘BEAUTY AND TRUTH’: THE RHETORIC OF POPULIST DISCOURSE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The “beauty and truth” in the title reminds one of John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” That is not only a great Romantic poem, but also a highly sophisticated rhetorical discourse. In it, the interwoven voices of the speaker, of the Urn, and of Keats himself as an implied author, exploit the ambivalence and ambiguity of the pronoun “we” in creating speakers and listeners, performers and audiences. The current article explores the rhetoric of populist discourse in one of Nigel Farage’s recent (May 4th, 2019) speeches. The speaker appeals to emotion rather than reason, systematically using anaphoric and epiphoric triads and other rhetorical devices to hammer his messages home. The article undertakes to examine the inconsistency in the speaker’s development of the antagonism between “ordinary,” “patriotic,” “honest” people seen as the vast majority of the British population (far more than the 52% who voted for Brexit in the 2016 referendum) and the remaining tiny minority, including the political and cultural elites, the multinationals, the banks, the hedge funds, identified as **THEY**. Nigel Farage, the son of a stockbroker, a stockbroker himself, the friend of stockbrokers supporting his campaign, is one of the ordinary, honest people.

**Keywords:** *Rhetoric, populism, elitism, pluralism, manipulation*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Throughout their history, both rhetoric as public political discourse and literary discourse in all its forms have appealed, through memorable expressions, making special uses of language, to the feelings and emotions of their target audiences. Both political and literary discourse lay claim to truth, of different kinds, at different levels. In order to do that, their authors pay attention to the craft with which they fashion the substance of their messages, thus attempting to link “beauty” and “truth.”

Language, whether perceived as literary or not, is power, as scholars related to those working in Cultural Studies, having already defined their approach as Critical Discourse Analysis, strongly believe. On the one hand, it can be said that the literary text is political. This is particularly useful in what follows in this text. The features of literary language, as well as some features of rhetoric in general, might enable someone like Nigel Farage to claim that his “political poetry,” his dubious “Beauty,” is “Truth.” Paul Chilton reminds his readers that for “Cicero the cultivation of the power of speech was the essence of the citizen’s duty” while for other thinkers who did not abuse this essence which one might call rhetorical skills “it was the essence of deception and distortion” [1]. We usually call it manipulation when we consider the public uses of language in the print press, the multimedia journalism or the political language in action. Current polls show that “the public trust print journalists

even less than they trust the politicians that the media tend to report on so negatively” [2]. However, large parts of the public are vulnerable to cheap forms of manipulation in the public space, and one particular form of populism and its mechanisms will be dealt with below. Both journalists and politicians are very much in the public eye and the impact of their discourse is considerable. What follows will focus on what is arguably the most effective form of political manipulation today, recorded as online populist discourse. It is not mediated by the print press, but largely by online platforms.

Hoping that the lovers of poetry will forgive the juxtaposition in the title above of a great poet and of the most notorious Brexiteer, one can arguably claim that Romanticism and populism appear to have to do with “spontaneous overflows of powerful feelings.” Both appeal to the feelings of their audiences. Both can be seen as revolutionary responses to the ... Age of Reason, to the poetic and to the political establishment, respectively. In his 2015 “UKIP and the Crisis of Britain,” Richard Seymour had examined one particular British crisis, much less divisive than what Brexit would turn out to be, in terms of the combination of rightist ideology and specific populist interpellations [3]. In May 2019, only four years later, just before the European Parliament elections, UKIP appears to have lost its momentum, but Nigel Farage has not. He has founded a new bandwagon, the Brexit Party, for his very effective brand of populism and right-wing nationalism.

## **FARAGE’S RHETORICAL OVERKILLS**

What follows examines what some might call Nigel Farage’s oratorical skills as revealed in the first few minutes of one of his recent speeches. Some might call the founder and father of the Brexit Party the most efficient political manipulator. This is a speech published on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019 by the *True Conservative* online platform. It can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNbw4hIMXiY>. The title under which it is released is typical of online journalism: “Watch Nigel Farage Give Another Epic Speech, Destroys May & Soubry.” *True Conservative* has strong figurative phrasing to sell Farage’s speech, which has become a commonplace, a dead metaphor in online comments on current political debates: Nigel Farage “wipes the floor” with Theresa May and Anna Soubry at another Brexit party rally.

The 2016 presidential elections in the US and the British referendum, held the same year, demonstrated the spectacular advances made by combinations of nationalism and populism. We no longer speak of “the crisis of Britain” to describe these advances, although the current paper concentrates on one particular illustration of it in terms of the mechanism of populism as wielded by the above-mentioned Nigel Farage, one of the “poets” that Plato would undoubtedly ban from his Republic. The “poets” who are the most important manipulators today are the likes of such professed “anti-career politicians” as the Brexit Party campaigners. The text of Farage’s speech under scrutiny below is an excellent textbook illustration of the way the discourse of populism works with considerable audiences even in countries with long liberal democratic traditions. Since this speech is not available in printed form at this moment, references will be made as [4] to successive segments of the speech from 0:17 to 7:11 in the 24-minute 9-second time format in which it can be found online.

Both Discourse Analysis as a whole and its more ideologically and politically involved Critical Discourse Analysis pay attention to context. The context in which Nigel Farage gave his May 4<sup>th</sup> speech is relevant to its content and its specific discourse function, being part of the campaign of the freshly founded, Eurosceptic Brexit Party. The context will be linked to the legitimate question, why? Why would Farage and his new political springboard, the Brexit Party, compete in the European Parliament elections if they are against the EU, what is more, if the UK is leaving the EU in a few months at the latest? Farage will both directly state and indirectly imply his and his party's objectives. In order to achieve his electoral aims on this particular occasion, he will have to make the audience identify with his WE against his opponents or rivals' THEM. It is worth stressing, and it will soon turn out, that Farage does not mean that the pronoun WE only stands for the 52 % of the British who voted LEAVE in 2016. It is important to deliver the clear message that WE stands, in his rhetoric, for the whole of Britain in 2019, and Britain stands for the Brexit Party, not the other way round.

For a starter, as if to challenge his East Midlands May 4<sup>th</sup> audience of Brexit Party fans, Farage begins his speech by a question, apparently inviting the people present to use their imagination: "Can you imagine if a country in Africa had an election and the result was ignored or overturned? I mean everybody would be in uproar wouldn't they" continuing after a split second's pause, "even Emma Thomson included I'm sure once she left her big boat..." [4]. Farage makes a longer, almost a one-second-and-a-half pause to allow the audience to laugh, while he himself laughs, with an unmistakable air of superiority. From now on, the speaker will insist on clearly making a distinction between "WE" as representing Britain, and "THEY," even if "they" might live in the same country, as aliens. The stress laid on the distinction WE/US vs. THEY/THEM is one of the most effective weapons of populism, and Farage is good at taking advantage of it. The THEM are not seen as the more than 48% of the British people who voted Remain, but as the tiny minority of the ruling elites: cultural icons, such as Emma Thomson, prominent intellectuals, politicians, experts of all kinds. WE, the ordinary people, are right, THEY, the elites, are wrong, which defines this kind of positioning as populism, in opposition to both elitism and pluralism in liberal democracies.

WE, Farage implies, although we have no big boats, are superior, we represent Britain, while Emma Thomson is one of "THEM." He has thus identified one of the Remainers, Emma Thomson, one of THEM, an affluent actress with a yacht all her own. Like her, some other members of an intellectual, artistic and political elite are to be seen as "them." The elites, including the career politicians are, according to previous Brexit discourse, against Brexit, while ordinary British people, like Nigel Farage, want "to take back control" for their currently enslaved country. These elites usually promote democratic causes in Africa and elsewhere, they show sympathy for refugees, what about the revolting issue of trying to ignore or even overturn the result of the 2016 referendum? Why would Brexit be questioned again, why should there be another people's vote now that some claim that the initial message was unclear? As for "everybody would be in uproar wouldn't they?" he obviously means "THEY" the very few of those who are not "WE."

After this invitation for his supportive audience, the “WE,” to imagine “THEY” being in uproar whenever it comes to affronts to democracy abroad, Farage goes on to confirm, through the rhetoric of triadic repetition, the identity of WE the British people. Farage is obviously trying to emulate Sir Winston Churchill. More specifically, not Churchill as a military genius, who recovered after the terrible mistakes made as an officer in the 1915 Gallipoli campaign, but as a great World War II orator and leader, and then a Nobel Prize winner for literature in 1953. Here is how Farage, walking in Churchill’s footsteps, uses anaphora in order to stress the idea that WE represent not the less than 52 %, but Great Britain as a whole: “HERE WE ARE living in a country with eight hundred years of continuous although evolving parliamentary government, HERE WE ARE with the mother of parliaments, HERE WE ARE who exported that very concept of democracy to America and to the rest of the Empire as the world changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” [4]. Exporting democracy to America and the rest of the Empire? Farage is taking risks here, not with the devout audience he is addressing, but with such people as his role model and mentor, Donald Trump. Will the American take offence? Here the speaker appeals to his audience’s imperial nostalgia and pride. The message is, it is not only that WE have the mother of parliaments, but WE as the British Empire taught OUR former colonies, including America, what democracy is. In Farage’s opinion, OUR imperial Britain had exported democracy to its colonies, now we want to take our power back from the bureaucrats in Brussels, who, like Emma Thomson, qualify for the oppositional pronoun THEY.

After a short, significant pause for dramatic effect, expecting his audience to respond, he continues, using small case in “we,” a less important we, which refers to THEY: “everyone would be in uproar / we demand the United Nations were sent in as this affront to democracy had taken place ///” [4] There follows another pause, the speaker waiting for the audience to laugh, after which he himself laughs ... “heh heh heh.” The speech contains a succession of soundbites, exploiting rhetorical questions, clichés and rhetoric based on repetition, especially anaphora-type or epiphora-type triads. Thus, the next speech segment features an anaphoric triad to highlight the terribly difficult situation the speaker imagines Britain to be in: “THIS/ ladies and gentlemen/ THIS SCANDAL/ THIS OUTRAGE/ THIS ABUSE is happening in OUR own nation and WE’ve got to put a stop to it./” [4] [long round of applause] The game of oppositions between sets of personal pronouns continues. Here is the opposition between lower case “our” and upper case “WE/US.” It turns out that “our” in “our Prime minister” is not linked to US, but to THEM, to the “Labour and Conservative party representatives who do not believe in Britain,” the likes of Anna Soubry and Ken Clarke. It is a reinforcement of the previous statement about this scandal/this outrage/this abuse.

So, what have THEY done, the PM and THEY/THEM as a tiny minority, those who are against US/WE? Nigel Farage stresses his dramatic pronouncement with another anaphoric triad, within the larger framework of WE vs. THEY throughout the speech: “Our Prime Minister has belittled US / our Prime Minister has allowed US to be humiliated on the world stage / our Prime Minister and most of the Labour and Conservative party representatives do not believe in Britain / they simply like Anna Soubry and Ken Clarke from this city /they simply don’t think WE are good enough.” [4] “Ken Clarke from this city” obviously refers to one of the longest serving Conservative MPs and “this city” identifies the place the speech is being given in:

Rushcliffe, East Midlands (South Nottinghamshire). Farage is taking right wing voters away from the Conservatives in that area. Anna Soubry had also been a Conservative MP for Nottinghamshire. A “remainer,” Soubry has left the Conservative Party before the 2019 EU elections, in protest against her party’s position on the Brexit controversy.

Farage’s rhetorical artillery fire displayed before his East Midlands audience continues with a formidable series of PROUD WE/US/OURSELVES sequences weaving together belief in “OUR” own proud heritage and proud national identity, featuring liberty, freedom, democracy as “OUR” defining features:

[...] and yet I KNOW I KNOW that out there what the Brexit debate did is it let the genie out of the bottle/ it allowed US for the first time perhaps in decades/ to start believing in OURSELVES/ to start believing in OUR people/ to start believing and saying / WE were PROUD to be part of OUR nation WE were PROUD to be patriotic PROUD about who WE were PROUD about what OUR grandparents and great-grandparents did to fight for LIBERTY for FREEDOM and DEMOCRACY/ PROUD of who WE are [...] [long round of applause] [4]

Communication in general is based on a reasonable amount of redundancy in order to diminish the risk of misunderstanding. Populist Nigel Farage discourse largely relies on more than redundant, on exaggerated, intensive rhetorical repetitions followed by significant pauses, as in “lions led// by// donkeys.” Farage will come back to the opposition between WE the people and “our” rulers/PM, stressing what OUR problem is all about. The opposition between WE and THEY will this time be clothed in far from complimentary metaphorical language (“donkeys”) as far as “our rulers” are concerned. In Farage’s figurative language, OUR nation is led by donkeys: “This nation has once again become self-confident self believing/ the problem are our rulers / and I genuinely believe that the United Kingdom today / WE are LIONS led/ by/ donkeys/ I genuinely do” [long round of applause] [4] The speaker has now stressed the real objective of his party’s campaign. It is not in order to win seats in the EU Parliament in the June 2019. This campaign is part of a larger one, meant to destroy the British two-party system based on Conservative and Labour career politicians. Now that he has persuaded his East Midlands audience that they are lions, the speaker can afford to give up “WE” for a while and insist on “I” as the sole Founding Father of the Brexit Party, in the context of ‘THEY/THEM having ‘betrayed’ Britain:

[...] So I set the Brexit Party up a few months ago because it had become obvious to me with our current crop of politicians left alone without any threats/ many electoral threats to them that Brexit / simply/ would/ not/ happen/ that that betrayal would become complete so I thought there was a real chance of these European elections coming and that is why I set this party up [4].

The speaker switches back to WE/OUR, hesitating between SOME of OUR candidates and MANY OF OUR PEOPLE to refer to HIS (Farage’s) candidates. As it is known, the Brexit Party does not accept members, only financial supporters. The supporters, as well as Nigel Farage and his candidates, are to be understood as WE:

[...] so WE are organizing We are mobilizing you've seen the caliber as some of OUR candidates already / MANY of OUR people have been successful in their own lives / many of OUR PEOPLE have done well in business and in many other walks of life before they're coming into politics and that's needed because apart from the sheer willful betrayal of our democratic system and our repeated vote the other thing that has come to life is the sheer incompetence and uselessness of our career politicians who've never done a proper job in / their / lives [round of applause] never/never/ [round of applause] [4]

Farage has learnt the populist lesson: the whole political system is defunct. The career politicians are all completely incompetent and useless, whereas OUR candidates are ordinary people, simple people, honest people. Most of these people come from business, some of them, like Nigel Farage and his father, have made a modest living as stockbrokers. Nigel's candidates, having done well in business for themselves, apparently a multiethnic, multicultural bunch ("all colours, all creeds") being metamorphosised inside the Brexit Party melting pot, will now be unified by their common belief to serve the country and to forget about their previous businesses. The rhetorical vehicle through which this important decision is conveyed is another anaphoric triad, highlighting ALL OF WHOM, the business people having decided to serve the ordinary people:

So we're gonna put before you an impressive array of men and women from all parts of this nation from all backgrounds from all colors from all creeds but all of whom are unified by their belief in this country/ *all of whom* are unified by their belief in democracy/ *all of whom* have lost trust and faith in our incompetent leaders in Westminster [4]

Farage briefly switches to I/ME to add a personal touch and to present himself as a man of the people. Among his well advertised vices is his previous excessive indulgence in beer. Here he shows himself as often going to the bookmakers to make a bet. However, he unwittingly reminds everyone that both himself and his father and his friends and donors are stockbrokers and hedge fund speculators. In other words, ordinary, simple, hard working people. Here is him advertising his "vice" and his party's intention to "fight," not to compete, in the European elections:

and when I went in to that bookmaker's last Friday [laughter from the audience] because *among my many well advertised vices* [he laughs] I quite like a bet so I backed the Brexit Party at three to one to be the top party in these European elections and much as one never knows over the course of the next weeks let me make it clear our intention is to fight these European elections and our intention is to win these European elections [round of applause] [4]

He then stresses, once again, the necessity of breaking the British political system, while identifying another enemy that has to be dealt with, the mainstream media:

I think it's obvious there are two big parties [that] serve nothing but their own interests and agenda rather than the nation more broadly [round of applause] I

think it is clear/ I think it's very clear/ that we now have a parliament that does not represent the will of the people / a mainstream media that seems to have no comprehension/ of what is going on in this country [...] [4]

In addition to the British political system, entirely worthless, although the fruit of an eight-hundred-year-old British tradition, to the mainstream British press, equally worthless, Farage identifies as THEY the inhabitants of a very narrow geographical section, metropolitan London, surrounded by the M25 London Orbital Motorway, an area within "the confines perhaps of the M25 but maybe it is even narrower to a few central London boroughs." The message is that these metropolitan and cosmopolitan Londoners are not the real, ordinary, honest WE: they voted Remain. They are the irrelevant THEY, in addition to the PM, the elites, and a Parliament which does not represent the people. After identifying the "betrayal" associated with the enemy of the "people," Farage declares, once more, that the main aim of his enterprise is "something far bigger /something far bigger for just a protest vote about betrayal with not leaving the European Union/ WE need something more fundamental." [4] The main objective is that, through the direct democracy exerted by the WE, rather than through the pluralism of the British party-system, Britain should be made great again and, forgetting its long tradition of parliamentary life, to start from scratch again, trusting its newly found leader.

## CONCLUSION

Populist forms of rhetoric, largely supported by online communication, appear to have become important tools in contemporary cultural and political discourse. They need all the attention that they can get if one is to understand where the world is headed. Spectacular progress in information and communication technology has created opportunities, as well as major threats. What is the reasonable level of critical thinking that the majority of the members of a community ought to have in order to be able to judge between democratic and populist appeals to various target audiences? Most forms of political rhetoric and of literary language address their audiences' emotions to a very large extent. If beauty in poetry is not that dangerous, insidious populist rhetoric definitely is when it targets uncritical, sensitive victims. Fortunately, even shrewd populist manipulators make mistakes. After dividing Britain between the good WE, ordinary, honest people and THEY, the big business, the banks, the multinationals, Farage, declaring himself as belonging to the former group, reminds his audience about his stockbroker's background, more likely to be associated with the latter group.

## REFERENCES

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[4] True Conservative. Published on May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Watch Nigel Farage Give another Epic speech, Destroys May & Soubry <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNbw4hIMXiY> [quotes from 0:17 to 7:11]